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Evolution of cyanobacterial morphotypes

Taxa required for improved phylogenomic approaches

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Within prokaryotes cyanobacteria represent one of the oldest and morphologically most diverse phyla on Earth. The rise of oxygen levels in the atmosphere 2.32–2.45 billion years ago is assigned to the photosynthetic activity of ancestors from this phylum. Subsequently cyanobacteria were able to adapt to various habitats evolving a comprehensive set of different morphotypes. In a recent study we showed that this evolution is not a gradual transition from simple unicellular to more complex multicellular forms as often assumed. Instead complexity was lost several times and regained at least once. An understanding of the genetic basis of these transitions would be further strengthened by phylogenomic approaches. However, considering that new methods for phylogenomic analyses are emerging, it is unfortunate that genomes available today are comprised of an unbalanced sampling of taxa. We propose avenues to remedy this by identifying taxa that would improve the representation of phylogenetic diversity in this phylum.

unicellular species, whereas sections III, IV and V consist of multicellular species. Sections IV and V evolved terminal differentiation and therefore represent the most morphologically complex cyanobacteria. Fossil records of cyanobacteria are well established and can be found in 2.0 billion year old rock formations.³ In a recently published study, we traced the origin of multicellularity in cyanobacteria, and found a pattern of frequent morphological transitions.⁴ A fast heuristic maximum likelihood approach made it possible to reconstruct a phylogeny of cyanobacteria for over a thousand taxa based on 16S rRNA sequences. A smaller subset of cyanobacteria representing full morphological and genetic diversity was used for the maximum likelihood and Bayesian reconstruction of ancestral character states. These analyses demonstrated that all cyanobacteria share a unicellular most recent common ancestor. However, multicellularity evolved very early in the cyanobacterial lineage. Evolution and divergence from the ancient multicellular lineage led to the richness of morphotypes manifested by cyanobacteria today. In the course of the cyanobacterial diversification process, complexity in the form of multicellular growth was lost at least five times. It was also regained at least once. Furthermore, by comparing the results to the prokaryotic fossil record, it was possible to elucidate that multicellularity evolved in cyanobacteria earlier than 2.0 billion years ago, possibly prior to the “Great Oxygenation Event.” Several multicellular prokaryotic fossils that are suggestive of cyanobacterial morphotypes

Key words: major transitions, Dollo’s law, Great Oxygenation Event, cyanobacterial fossils, origin of life, eubacterial phylogenetics

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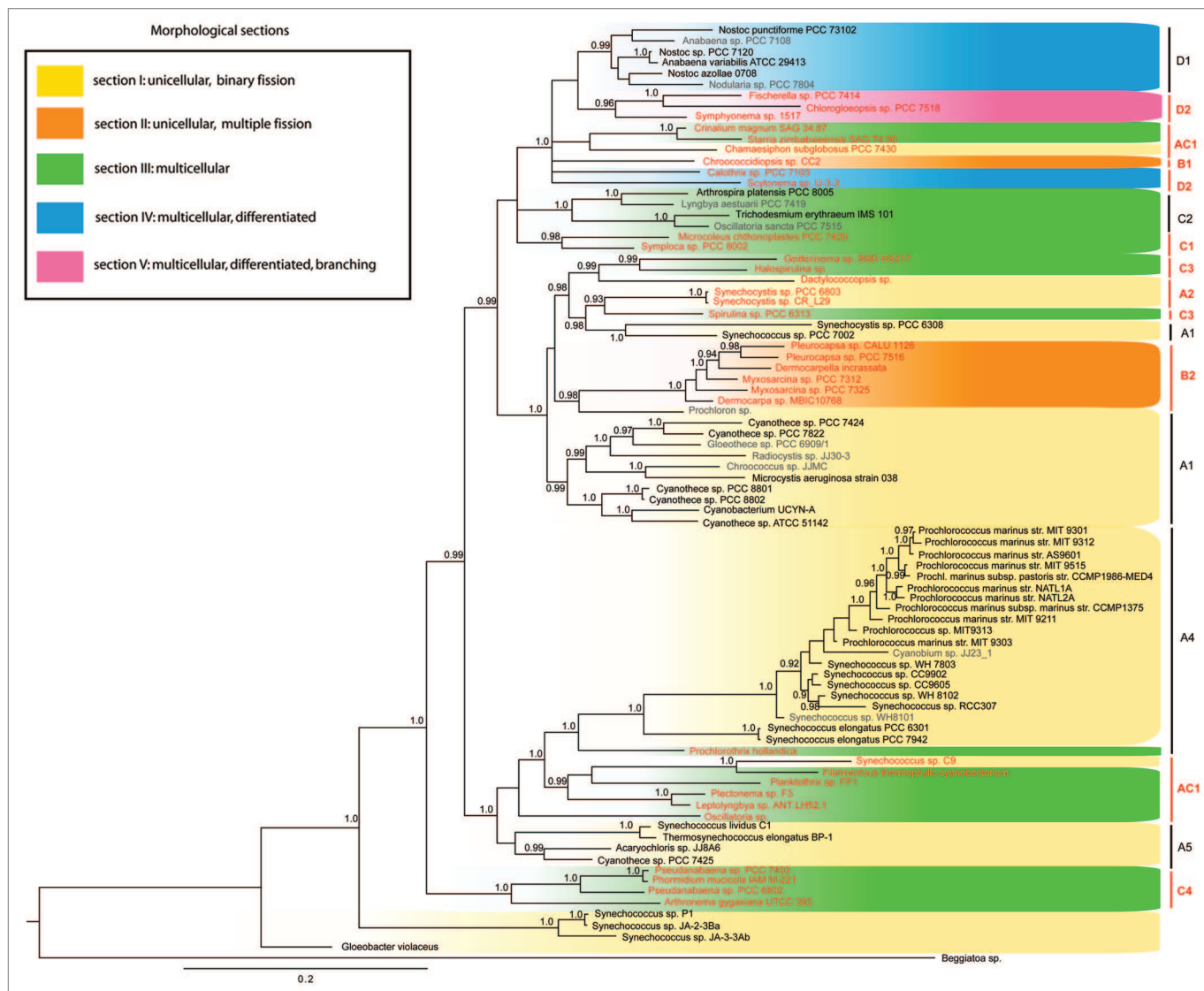


Figure 2. Phylogenetic tree of a cyanobacterial subset representing the full morphological and genomic diversity. The tree was reconstructed from 16S rRNA sequences using a Bayesian approach. Colors describe different morphological sections. Fully sequenced taxa are shown in black. Shown in red are taxa of groups where no genome sequence data are available at present, and which we recommended for genome sequencing. Taxa have been selected as previously described in reference 4, with the addition of 41 taxa for which full genome sequences are available.

genome data completely. **Figure 2** shows a well resolved phylogenetic reconstruction of cyanobacterial taxonomy, highlighting in red the species recommended for future genome projects. Multicellular species are found in groups D1, D2, C1, C2, C3, C4 and AC1, but only six species from two of these groups (D1, C2) are completely sequenced. Special attention should be brought to multicellular species from groups AC1 and C4 which branch closer to the outgroup (**Fig. 2**) and therefore would be valuable for exploring the origin of multicellularity. Furthermore, genomes for future sequencing can be rigorously

selected in order to maximize both the phylogenetic and morphological diversity. This can for example be done using a simple “greedy” algorithm,⁹ by iteratively choosing the best immediate taxon (i.e., those adding most PD) based on the phylogeny depicted here.

State of the art methods for supermatrix and supertree construction aim to infer the species phylogeny from thousands of taxa and multiple genomic loci.¹⁰ Although for prokaryotes inferring a single species phylogeny may be particularly hampered by frequent lateral gene transfer, recombination and species

delimitation problems.¹¹ Nonetheless the availability of better genomics data will make it possible to study the distribution of individual gene histories, from which the evolutionary mechanisms and their patterns may be inferred. Developments in statistical and computational methodology offer improved alignment strategies¹² and enable inference in the presence of recombination, incomplete lineage sorting and lateral gene transfer. In addition, the natural lineage heterogeneity may now be studied at the genomic scale using non-stationary or nonreversible Markovian models,¹³ leading to the better understanding

of the biological forces driving lineage specific biases such as those affecting the evolutionary rates and molecular composition in diverse groups.

A more representative sampling of cyanobacterial species would provide a basis for future phylogenomic analyses that would offer insights into the early history of cyanobacteria. This would not only strengthen and further test the results of the study discussed here, but also enable others to identify and reconstruct the evolution of a wide set of genes that have been responsible for morphological and biochemical adaptations in this phylum.

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